



Seeking a Better Urban Future
IPS–Nathan Lectures by Dr Cheong Koon Hean

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FROM March to April 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the [5th IPS–Nathan Lectures](#), delivered by Dr Cheong Koon Hean. The series, collectively titled *Seeking a Better Urban Future*, focused on the challenges brought on by rapid urbanisation and the considerations needed in planning for Singapore’s urban future.



Dr Cheong Koon Hean delivering her first IPS-Nathan Lecture on 26 March 2018.

Dr Cheong, who is currently the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Housing & Development Board (HDB), shared her insights on urban planning with the audience, based on her experience as an architect-planner. Dr Cheong was also CEO of the Urban Redevelopment Authority from 2004 to 2010. Among her many achievements, she was instrumental in the

rejuvenation of the Marina Bay area and the development of the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco City.

“I hope to create a greater awareness, particularly among Singaporeans, of the complexities and difficulties in managing a city,” said Dr Cheong in a [pre-lecture interview](#) on what she wished to achieve with her lectures.

“I hope that people can understand that Singapore is quite an anomaly—we are a city and a country. That means that we are very land and resource-constrained, and so, in developing the city, there are actually a lot of trade-offs and considerations. This means that sometimes, you cannot have everything you want,” she added.



One of the S R Nathan Fellowship's aims is to advance greater discussion of issues of critical interest among young Singaporeans.

An average of 350 people attended each lecture, with many students, including those from junior colleges, undergraduates from architecture and building environment, and polytechnic students. All three lectures and accompanying question-and-answer sessions are being edited and compiled into a book, scheduled to be released in late 2018. Highlights from Dr Cheong's lectures are summarised below.

Lecture I – What Makes a City Successful? Lessons from Inspiring Cities (26 March 2018)

Moderated by Mr Wong Mun Summ, Founding Director, WOHA Architects.

With the growing trend towards urbanisation, Dr Cheong began her lecture series by giving a broad overview on what makes cities successful. Drawing from the Prize Laureate Cities of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize, including Bilbao, New York City and Seoul, Dr Cheong highlighted six traits:

- i) Planning long-term and planning with implementation in mind;
- ii) Harnessing partnerships and engaging residents;
- iii) Focusing on the fundamentals of improving quality of life, greater inclusiveness and reducing inequalities;
- iv) Being multi-dimensional in the approach to planning—emphasising culture, design, heritage, place-making and programming;
- v) Building environmental resilience and adopting sustainable practices; and
- vi) Having strong leadership and good governance.

Dr Cheong was also quick to assert that these were not formulas. “There is no perfect city and no perfect formula, because every city is different,” she explained in the question-and-answer session. “It seems that the lessons from these cities are the best practices, but you have to select carefully for your city. A solution for New York may not be the right solution for Medellín.”



Members of the audience remained engaged throughout Dr Cheong's lectures.

Lecture II – Anticipating our Urban Future: Trends, Threats and Transformations (10 April 2018)

Moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee, Chairman, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities.

Moving from the macro focus of Lecture I, Dr Cheong's second lecture looked at Singapore and the mega-trends that will pose risks, challenges and disruptions to cities. How do Singapore's unique circumstances as a city-state affect its responses to the threats? For instance, shifting parts of the commercial core outside the Central Business District could ease congestion and traffic, making our city more liveable.



Dr Cheong speaking to students after her second lecture.

Lecture III – Shaping the Future of Heartland Living (23 April 2018)

Moderated by Professor Lily Kong, Provost, Singapore Management University.

In her third and last lecture, Dr Cheong highlighted several initiatives by HDB that aim to adapt to shifts in Singapore's demographic trends and the way Singaporeans work, play and live. For instance, the Studio Apartment Scheme caters to the demands of our ageing population.

Dr Cheong also expanded on the concept of citizen engagement, which had been brought up in the question-and-answer sessions of previous lectures.

“The most difficult part is when one person likes it but another does not like it. Participatory planning is about hearing all views—in the end, you have to make a decision,” said Dr Cheong.

“You cannot please everyone but at least through the process, if you cannot give people something, you can explain why.”

The video of each lecture has been uploaded on [IPS' YouTube Page](#) and the [speeches are available on our website](#).

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